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ABSTRACT

Dissatisfied with traditional approaches to beginning reading practices dominated by phonics, basal reading series, and workbooks, and more importantly, influenced by research and knowledge about how children learn to read, teachers/educators launched a grass-roots whole language movement in the early 1980s. However, the term "whole language" has become broadly defined and loosely used in the professional literature. Because of such diversity in definition and because of inconsistencies within educational literature relating to the concept of whole language, it is no surprise that the relative effectiveness of whole language is very inconclusive and often controversial. A review of the research on the effects of whole language on beginning reading achievement indicates that no consistent conclusion can be drawn regarding its effectiveness. Jeanne Chall proposed that an understanding of how reading develops should help teachers/educators understand the highly controversial issues of what to teach, when, and by what methods. Chall's stage model of reading development may contribute to a better understanding of how reading is acquired and how the total environment, as well as the school environment, may be optimized for pupils at the different stages. (Thirty-six references are attached.) (RS)

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Whole Language Approach: Is It Really Better?

Jianhua Feng

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Introduction

Beginning reading has long been a source of concern and research interest for teachers. In fact, reading is the most researched of all subjects in elementary schools (Chall, 1983). When to start reading instruction, how to teach beginning reading, and what is the best way to teach a young child to read are the issues that have been debated with intense fervor and considerable rancor over the years. And now parents, teachers, reading specialists and researchers are still searching for the best and most appropriate approach to beginning reading instruction. Historically, a variety of methods have been developed , according to Chall (1967), including look-and-say whole word method, language experience approach, programmed reading, individualized reading, and systematic phonic instruction. However, it seems that no two people agree on an answer about the one best method. In her influential book "Learning to Read: the Great Debate", Chall (1983) cautiously admits,

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> One of the most important things, if not the most important thing, I learned from studying the existing research on beginning reading is that it says nothing consistently. It says too much about some things, too little about others. And if you select judiciously and avoid interpretations, you can make the research 'prove' almost anything you want it to. (p.87)

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Dissatisfied in part with traditional approaches and in reaction to current beginning reading practices predominated by phonics, basal reading series, and workbooks (Freeman & Hatch, 1989; Hollingsworth,

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Reutzel, & Weeks, 1990), and more importantly based on current research and knowledge about how children learn to read, teachers/educators launched a grass-roots whole language movement in the early 80's. It seems everywhere we turn these days, someone has something to say about "whole language". The term whole language has become a common "buzzword" for most educators, and is a prominent theme in journal articles, books, conference presentations, publisher's advertising, and the media. A simple reason behind the spreading enthusiasm for whole language, as Mckenna, Robinson, and Miller (1990) point out, is that "teachers find its rationale appealing, empowering, refreshingly child-centered, and intuitively correct" (p.3). According to Altwerger, Edelsky and Flores (1987),

> Whole language is based on the following ideas: (a) language is for making meanings, for accomplishing purposes; (b) written language is language - thus what is true for language in general is true for written language; (c) the cuing systems of language ... are always simultaneously present and interacting in any instance of language in use; (d)language use always occurs in a situation; (e) situations are critical to meaning-making. (p. 154)

However, the term whole language has become broadly defined and loosely used in the professional literature. The definitions are often vague and elusive. According to Goodman (1986), whole language is a set of beliefs about how language learning happens and a set of principles to guide classroom practice, and "a whole language program is an educational program conducted by whole language teachers"(p. 5). Bird (1987) describes whole language as " a way of thinking, a way of living and learning with children in classroom" (p. 4). Watson (1989) defines whole language as "a perspective on education" (p. 133), and Newman (1985) believes whole language is a philosophical stance. In an attempt to

construct a definition for whole language, Bergeron (1990) analyzed existing literature pertaining to whole language instruction in elementary classrooms and defined whole language as "a concept that embodies both a philosophy of language development as well as the instructional approaches embodied within, and supportive of, that philosophy" (p. 319). According to Watson (1989), there are three reasons for the difficulty in defining whole language. One is that advocates of whole language reject a dictionary-type definition, and another is that strong emotions against or for whole language make communication between its advocates and opponents potentially difficult. Finally, the experts in whole language, the teachers, who can provide the richest answers have not yet been adequately tapped for their input.

Because of such a diversity in definition and inconsistencies within educational literature relating to the concept of whole language, it is no surprise that the relative effectiveness of whole language is very much inconclusive and often controversial. The great debate on the best method to teach beginning reading is therefore still going on. In an article on faddism in education, Slavin (1989) discusses the tendency in education toward faddism known as the "swinging pendulum," and points out,

> If education is ever to make serious general progress, educators must somehow stop the pendulum by focusing their efforts to improve education on programs that are effective, rather on those that are merely new and sound good. (p. 758)

What is whole language, anyway?

"Whole language" is one of the liviest current grass-root movements among teachers in the 1990s (Wagner, 1989). In part, the whole language movement is a reaction to a trend that has characterized for several decades much of elementary educational practice in this country focusing on the mastery of isolated reading and writing skills. Although the formal

label only dates back a few years or so, whole language has deep roots both inside and outside of education. According to Goodman (1989), whole language owes its intellectual heritage to John Amos Comenius, a 17th century educator who believed that learning should be plearsurable and rooted in students' real lives; to John Dewey's philosophy of progressive education; to Friedrich Froebel, the founder of kindergartens, which have a lot in common with ideal whole language classrooms; to Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky, who emphasized the social aspects of learning and the role teachers and peers play in supporting it; to Dorris Lee and Lillian Lamoreaux, whole language-experience approach encourages teachers to use students' stories as classroom reading material; and to Donald graves, pioneer of "process writing", who encourages both teachers and students to write more. Recent theories and research in psycholinguistics and emergent literacy have provided whole language a more scientific base (Goodman, 1989; Gursky, 1991).

Psycholinguist Ken Goodman pioneered "whole language", as it is called in the United States. In 1968, Goodman (1976) developed a psycholinguistic model of the reading process based on the study of the development of oral reading. He refuted the notion that reading is a precise process involving exact, detailed, sequential perception and identification of letters, words, and language units. For him, reading is a "psycholinguistic guessing game" (1976), a selective process involving use of one's language cueing systems - the phonographemic, syntactic, and semantic - through which the reader reconstructs a message from the writer. A strong focus is placed on functional oral language experiences and reading aloud is seen as a means of encouraging students to use their language knowledge to make sensible predictions in constructing the meaning of text. For whole language advocates, reading is a process of prediction, selection, confirmation, and self-correction as the readers

attempt to make meaning out of print (Goodman, 1979).

At the core of the Goodman model is the view that "language processes must be studies in the context of their use" (Goodman, 1979). According to Goodman, language is language only when it is whole. If language processes are dissected, stopped or unnaturally constrained then the relative significance of constituents to whole is altered. Whole text - connected discourse in the context of some speech or literacy event - is really the minimal functional unit, the smallest whole that makes sense. A central notion to whole language theory is that learning should go from whole to part as spoken language is learned. The "whole" is viewed as always greater than the sum of its parts (Goodman, 1986). Once students experience the whole, they are able to deal more closely with analysis of the parts that comprise it. These parts constitute the many specific language skills important to developmental reading and writing. These skills should be taught in the context of the whole, for only in its entirety does the text communicate its fullest meaning.

The whole language approach to reading and writing has been described as a "top-down" approach (Goodman, 1976). Students begin with a whole text and experience its fullest meaning. In story reading, following response to the story as a whole, the child is involved in activities that focus on specific paragraphs, sentences, words, or individual letters. In this way, the teacher is able to teach specific skills in a contextual way important to both reading and writing.

Children come to school with a natural tendency to make sense of the world and bring a rich and fully functioning knowledge of the spoken aspect of language (Goodman, 1986). Because virtually all babies learn to speak their home language in a very short time without formal teaching, Goodman stresses the need to make language learning in school as easy as was the case in the home. He suggests that, instead of using carefully

sequenced programs, children should be invited to use language functionally and purposefully.

Based on whole language theory, Eldredge (1991) points out that a whole language classroom must have the following characteristics: (1) the teaching of speaking, listening, reading, and writing is integrated; (2) children are involved in writing activities even before they can read, write, and spell accurately; (3) opportunities are provided for children to use their own oral language skills in writing activities; (4) children's literature is used rather than basal readers; (5) literacy instruction is organized around themes, or topics of interest to children to provide opportunities for them to listen, speak, read, and write; (6) intrinsic motivation is used to stimulate student involvement in language activities; (7) student interaction is encouraged by provided opportunities for them to read, write, speak, and listen to each other; (8) opportunities are provided for students to work together on common interests and goals; (9) children are involved in holistic reading and writing activities.

Whole language approach: Its comparative effects

Current reading education literature is replete with articles and monographs extrolling the virtues of whole language as a viable and effective approach to beginning reading instruction, however, little quantitative research has been completed on the relative effectiveness of the whole language approach. Much of the research features presentation of theoretical constructs and the curriculum structures that develop from this philosophical basis. One reason for the lack of empirical studies comparing whole language with other reading instructional approaches stems from a substantial resistance from whole language advocates toward traditional research design and instrumentation. In fact, whole language proponents have expressed a strong adversity to traditional quantitative

research, believing that most standardized tests of reading and writing focus on isolated skills and do not test effective use of language (Goodman, 1986; Goodman, 1989). Another reason is that whole language is not well defined (Bergeron, 1990). Whole language has been described as an attitude of mind (Rich, 1985), a philosophy (Clarke,1987), a method (Hajek, 1984), an approach (Mosenthal, 1989), and a perspective on education (Watson, 1989). Such a diversity in terminology may already have led to inconsistent research results because each whole language approach may differ substantially.

Although empirical studies are very limited, some quantitative research does exist. Ribowsky (1985) claims to have conducted the first quantitative or comparative study of whole language with a traditional code emphasis program at the kindergarten level. This study involved two intact kindergarten classrooms in a girl's parochial school, one receiving a whole language approach using the Big Book or Shared Reading Experience as described by Holdaway (1979), and the other using a code emphasis approach via Lippincott's Beginning to Read, Write, and Listen program. The children all came from middle class homes and shared similar cultural and religious orientation. Standardized posttest results on students' linguistic literacy set, orthographic literacy set, and grapho-phonemic literacy set indicated a significant treatment effect favoring the whole language approach group.

In a literature review for school administration, Heald-Taylor (1989) reported a study by Phinney (1986). Significant gains were found for children who received whole language instruction in kindergarten and first grade tracked over a 3-year period. However, the comparison used the longitudinal gains made by children, without the advantage of a comparison group followed over the same time period.

Gunderson and Shapiro (1987) conducted a study in two first grade classrooms of mutil-ethnic children using whole language instruction and compared vocabulary generated by students writing with basal vocabulary. The comparisons suggested that students learn a great number of phonics skills and master high frequency vocabulary presented in basal readers.

Freeman and Freeman (1987) investigated approaches to reading acquisition used in four first grades of a middle-class suburban elementary school. They compared students from four programs on word recognition and reading comprehension, and found that (1) children who were exposed to many different books had higher independent reading levels; (2) children who were instructed to read for understanding achieved better reading comprehension. Results of the study indicated that the whole language approach was a viable alternative for teaching beginning reading and writing. However, the sample size for the study was very small -- only nine children from each program were compared. Also in the study, the whole language approach and the language experience approach were not clearly distinguished, and in fact they were used interchangeably.

Kasten and Clarke (1989) conducted a year-long study of the emerging literacy of preschoolers and kindergartners mostly from low-income, working class minority homes. Their investigation focused on two preschools and two kindergarten classes that implemented certain strategies associated with a whole language philosophy including shared daily reading experiences and weekly opportunities to write freely. Results from the study indicated that children in the experimental group performed significantly better than their comparison peers in areas of knowledge about books and reading, story-retelling, and message writing. The experimental subjects not only knew more than their comparison peers about the meaningful aspects of reading, but they also exhibited enthusiasm for books and stories.

Eddowes (1990) compared the effects of skills-based and holistic child-centered approach to teaching beginning reading in two kindergarten classes of a southeastern elementary school serving families in the middle to lower middle socioeconomic level. The primary research questions related to reading achievement, the overall atmosphere of the classroom, and interest and motivation of the children No significant differences between the groups were found on any measures of sounds/letters, word reading, silent reading, and oral reading. However, teachers reported that children in the holistic language group had more interest in reading and more social interaction related to language activities. One limitation of the study was that the two groups of children were in the same classroom with the same teachers in succeeding years.

In a study comparing the traditional basal reader approach with the whole language approach, Reutzel and Cooter (1990) studied first-grade children from four intact classrooms located in two suburban communities in the Midwest and Rocky Mountain West. They found significant differences between the two approaches favoring whole language classes over the basal classes in both vocabulary and comprehension. Others who have examined the effectiveness of whole language instruction in first-grade classrooms include Klesius, Griffith, and Zielonka (1991). They studied six intact classes of students in two schools. Twenty-two percent of the participants in the traditional school and 40 percent of the subjects in the whole language school were from low-income families. Three whole language classrooms were compared with three traditional ones on reading comprehension, vocabulary, phonemic awareness, decoding, spelling, and writing. They found no significant differences between the two instructional programs on any of the variables.

Manning, Manning and Long (1991) studied the comparative effects of whole language practices and a skills-oriented program on the reading

achievement of children from an inner-city, low SES school from the time they entered kindergarten to the end of second grade. All 22 subjects in their study were randomly placed in one of the two groups. Assessments were made at the end of each school year of children's ideas about reading, their reading behaviors, and their reading achievements. Results from the study showed that by the end of second grade, children in the whole language group were better readers than those in the skills-oriented group in all areas. However, as the researchers (Manning, Manning & Long, 1991) pointed out, there were two limitations with the study. One was that the sample size was small -- only 11 children remained in each group; another was that no reliability or validity procedures were conducted on the kindergarten reading behavior scale.

Stice and Bertrand(1991) conducted a two-year long comparative study on the effectiveness of whole language practices on the literacy development of at-risk children. Subjects were 100 low SES first- and second-grade children matched by age, sex, race, and achievement. It was found that children from the whole language classrooms performed as well as their counterparts from traditional classes on standardized achievement tests in reading. However, informal, qualitative measures of literacy development indicated that, compared to children in traditional classrooms, children from the whole language classrooms: (1) read for meaning better, corrected more of their mistakes, and retold more fully the stories they read; (2) appeared more confident in their reading; and (3) appeared to possess a wider variety of strategies related to reading. The study concluded that whole language practices appear to be a viable alternative to traditional instruction for young children at-risk. However, subjects for the study included only 50 children, averaging five each in whole language classrooms, and their 50 matched children from traditional classrooms.

Eldredge (1991) conducted a year-long study comparing the effectiveness of a modified whole language approach and a basal approach on first-grade reading achievement and reading attitudes. The modified whole language approach incorporated all the main characteristics of the whole language approach, with the exception that a daily 15-minute period of total class phonics instruction was also implemented. The study was conducted in six classrooms from two elementary schools that served low SES families, had the lowest achievement scores and the largest student turnover in a district. Using a posttest only control group with a pretest covariate research design, it was found that students involved in the modified whole language program made greater achievement gains in phonics, vocabulary, reading comprehension, and total reading achievement than students in the basal program. Attitudes were also significantly better in the experimental classes than in the comparison group.

To examine the effects of whole language and language experience approaches on beginning reading achievement, Stahl and Miller (1989) completed a synthesis of quantitative research comparing whole language/language experience approaches to the basal reading approach for beginning readers. Out of the 180 studies reviewed, 80 comparisons came from the well known USOE first-grade studies. The other comparisons came from 100 non-USOE studies reported from the early sixties through the late eighties. Thirty three of the non-USOE studies involved kindergarten children; 65 studies involved first-grade children; and two studies spanned both the kindergarten and first grade. Based on a vote count (each result was counted as significantly favoring one approach) of the 33 readiness studies, 17 favored whole language/language experience approaches, 2 favored basals, and 14 revealed no differences. Of the 65 first-grade studies, 13 favored basals, 9 favored the whole language/language experience approach, and 43 revealed no differences. Of the two studies

spanning both grade levels, significant differences favoring whole language approaches were found at the end of kindergarten, but no significant differences were found at the end of first grade. The results suggest that, overall, whole language/language experience approaches and basal reader approaches are approximately equal in their effects. One exception to this is that whole language/language experience approaches may be more effective in kindergarten than in first grade.

A serious concern of the Stahl and Miller analysis is that whole language approach and language experience approach may share several commonalities but they have some important differences (McGee & Lomax, 1990; Klesius, Griffith & Zielonka, 1991). A primary difference between the two is that the reading material used for instruction in the language experience approach is text generated by children, whereas whole language approaches place more emphasis on the reading of tradebooks, especially those with predictable patterns. A second major difference is that whole language programs place greater emphasis on children's own writing using invented spelling, rather than dictated charts. Thus, the comparisons in this study make it difficult to determine the unique effects of "true" whole language programs.

Chall's stage model of reading development: A solution? Perhaps

From the above research review, it becomes obvious that no consistent conclusion can be drawn regarding the relative effectiveness of the whole language approach to reading instruction. To hopefully alleviate the uncertainty and confusion about reading that exists so widely today, Chall (1983) proposes that an understanding of how reading develops should help us understand the highly controversial issues of what to teach, when, and by what methods. As Chall (1983) observes, it is not uncommon for investigators to disagree over the meaning of reading and therefore the

persistent controversies in the field of reading research and practice, when each is concerned with a different stage of reading development.

According to Chall (1983), reading is not learned all at once, rather it develops in stages. The stages of reading development resemble stages of cognitive and language development. Like Piaget's cognitive stages, for example, reading stages have a definite structure and differ from one another in characteristic qualitative ways, generally following a hierarchical progression. The fact of successive stages means that readers do "different" things related to printed matter at each successive stage, although the term "reading" is commonly used for all the stages. Chall (1983) characterizes reading into six developmental stages:

Stage 0 - Prereading: birth to age 6
Stage 1 - Initial Reading, or Decoding: grades 1-2, ages 6-7
Stage 2 - Confirmation, Fluency, Ungluing from Print: grades 2-3, ages 7-8
Stage 3 - Reading for Learning the New: grades 4-8, ages 8-14
Stage 4 - Multiple Viewpoint: high school, ages 14-18
Stage 5 - Construction and Reconstruction of World View: college, ages 18 and above.

According to Chall's stage model of reading, style of reading processing tends to vary according to the reader's stage of development. At stage 0, there are few, and only rudimentary word perception skills available for reading. The "pseudo-reading" of the preschoolers is based primarily on prediction and memory. Reading at this stage is primarily a "top-down" process characterized by prediction and guessing from context - for both word recognition and comprehension - based on overall understanding of the text. The style changes at stage 1, when it becomes primarily a "bottom-up" process, focusing on word perception and decoding. To Chall (1983), it appears that the psycholinguistic theories of reading by Smith (1979) and Goodman (1979) make little provision for a decoding stage

(stage 1), and seem to show little concern for the kind of accuracy required in technical and scientific reading (stage 3 and beyond). According to those theories, there is one reading process - reading for meaning - which is essentially the same at the beginning level and at the highly skilled level.

Chall's stage model of reading development may contribute to a better understanding of how reading is acquired and how the total environment , as well as the school environment, may be optimized for pupils at the different stages. According to the model, it appears that children who enter first grade and are at the beginning of stage 1 should have more specific and systematic instruction than those who have made some inroads into decoding. The relations between sounds and letters, elementary decoding skills, are usually not discovered by the learner rather they require direct instruction. Toward the end of the decoding stage, the knowledge and skills acquired are usually sufficient to become self-generative.

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